

DESERT QUEEN RANCH, KEYS RANCH HOUSE
Joshua Tree National Monument
Twentynine Palms Vic.
San Bernardino County
California

HABS NO. CA-2347-A

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Historic American Building Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DESERT QUEEN RANCH--KEYS RANCH HOUSE (William F. Keys Ranch--Ranch House)

HABS No. CA-2347-A

Location: Joshua Tree National Monument, Twentynine Palms vicinity, San Bernardino County, California.

Present Owner: National Park Service; Joshua Tree National Monument.

Present Occupant: Unoccupied.

Present Use: Restoration of site; occasional summer tours.

Significance: The Keys Desert Queen Ranch in the Joshua Tree National Monument is an outstanding historical site of desert-based vernacular technologies displaying a range of architectural and engineering artifacts associated with the Euro-American era of settlement in the Mojave desert. The site is largely intact with nine buildings and four ore mills still surviving.

The house is a complex of five sections, three similar in character to mining cabins--simple wood-frame structures with gable roofs--and two additions with shed roofs. These kinds of buildings and their method of construction are typical of desert structures. Due to the scarcity of materials, especially of wood, throughout the tree-barren desert, cabins often were built of scavenged material, and, in some cases, whole cabins abandoned by miners and homesteaders were moved to new sites.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. **Date of erection:** in ca. 1912-1914, the main two-story section was erected.
2. **Original and subsequent owners:** The original occupants of the ranch were the McHaney brothers. William Keys got the ranch property in 1912 for back wages owed him by the owner of the Desert Queen Mine.
3. **Builders, Suppliers:** The builder of the original two-story portion of the house was William Keys. Sources for supplies are unknown but from the accumulation of different sizes of wood used on the exterior of the house, the materials very likely were scavenged from various mine sites in the desert.

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4. **Original plans and construction:** The original portion was the two-story, gable-roofed section now at the center of the sprawling complex, with a porch on three sides.

5. **Alterations and additions:**

ca. 1918: the first kitchen added to the southwest; it was brought over from the Tully Mine. The porch on the west side was removed. The previous kitchen was a tent along the west side of the two-story section.

1929-30: the porch on east side was enclosed.

ca. 1933-34: the second kitchen was attached to the west side of the two-story section, and the first kitchen was removed.

ca. 1943-44: south porch removed.

1950s: bathroom and shed added.

B. The Components of the House:

1. **The lower floor of the house:** There was nothing before on the spot where Keys built the house. Willis Keys believes the house was built about 1914-15 although other sources mention the year as being 1912. The southern single-story section had a partition, creating a bedroom for William and Frances Keys. The rest of the first floor was the living room.¹

The posts that now hold up the beam about a third of the way in the living room from the fireplace were not there originally. Keys installed the posts when the ceiling beam started to sag and twist. The living room area was wallpapered, maybe numerous times, and later Mrs. Keys calkimined the walls maybe two to three times.²

The chimney was built by a friend, Ray Bolster, along with Keys from rock on one of Keys' claims not far from the ranch. Keys quarried stone that came off in nice flat sheets and built a tram by the quarry to load them on a wagon. Large quantities of rock sat in the front (west) yard with Keys intending to rebuild the house with rock but that never came to pass. Most of those rocks are probably now in the large retaining wall extending from the boulders immediately north of the house.³

¹Willis Keys, son of William and Frances Keys, interviewed by Richard Vidutis at Joshua Tree National Monument, July 8-9, 1993, and at North Fork, CA, July 16-18, 1993, tape 2A.

²Keys, tape 2B.

³Keys, tape 2A.

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The fireplace warms well; Ray Bolster knew how to make the throat of the fireplace so that it would draw well. The only time it would smoke was when a wind would come from the north over the boulders and would go down the chimney. That is why Keys put the 50-gallon barrel on top of the chimney stack sometime in the 1950s.⁴

The concrete slab in front of the hearth was used to warm water, even car oil, by pulling hot coals onto it and placing the water or oil on them. The hook extending out of the front of the fireplace was used to hang a kettle and was used quite a bit. The hearth may have been made from fire brick.⁵

The door on the north wall east of the fireplace was not originally there. In its place were bookshelves. The door was added later, early 1950s, most likely for bringing wood in for the fireplace rather than tracking it in through the kitchen.⁶

2. The second story of the house: The second story of the house was used by the girls and was a very plain room. Phyllis does not remember the boys ever sleeping up there. Patricia Keys slept there for years when she came back from working in the East. Patricia later left and then Phyllis slept there for years. There were three double beds (one by the east window and two by the west window) in the upstairs. Other than the vent in the center of the floor which got heat from the fireplace downstairs, there was no heat. The girls thought of installing an oil heater but it never happened. There were no rugs on the floor. There was also a dresser, possibly two, one with a hanging mirror on the south side of the room between the sliding windows and a few chairs. There may have been a small table also and from time to time a few kerosene lamps. Phyllis Keys does not remember there being a closet in the upper story. The picture of Hiawatha hung on the wall.⁷
3. Roof: Phyllis Keys remembers a few of the uncles, including Carl Rasmussen, helping put a shake roof on the house. Later Keys replaced it with a corrugated metal roof, although she does not remember the porch being covered with metal. The wind would blow the sheets up and Keys would have to replace them from time to time. To keep the metal from being blown up and off the roof, Keys placed horizontal lengths of thin gauged rail taken from tracks used in mines. They were held to the roof with wire.⁸

⁴Keys, tape 2A.

⁵Keys, tape 2B.

⁶Keys, tape 2A.

⁷Phyllis Keys Meidell, daughter of William and Frances Keys, interviewed by Richard Vidutis in Hesperia, CA, August 24-25, 1993, tape 5B.

⁸Meidell, tape 5B.

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4. **The old kitchen:** In the early days the living room or the fireplace was probably used in some way for kitchen-related needs. An historic photograph shows a tent attached to the house on the northwest side where the new kitchen eventually was placed. The tent predates the old kitchen, which was added in about 1918 on the southwest side. The area between the house and kitchen was screened in to the corner of the house, while the porch around the house was left open. The old kitchen was a cabin from one of the area's mines (probably the Tully mine).⁹

The old kitchen was a very tiny room and was nothing fancy. The breezeway between the house and old kitchen was used as a pantry. The opening between the living room and kitchen had a long area where the Keyeses stored canning jars: cans of dried fish, flour, and other items. The shelves had quite a lot of room for crocks of pickles, and other items.¹⁰

After it was replaced, the old kitchen was taken to the South House and added onto its west end (see HABS No. CA-2347-G).

5. **The present kitchen:** The new kitchen was added in the mid-1930s. Willis Keys remembers it as about 1933-34, while Phyllis Keys remembers it as 1937-39. Phyllis remembers a lot of people helping her father build the new kitchen. Her uncle Carl Rasmussen (Aunt Connie's husband), the cabinetmaker in the family, helped, and probably her uncles Buster Lawton, Al Lawton and Aaron Lawton because they spent a lot time at the ranch. Some of the teachers may have been there also helping build the new kitchen.¹¹

Before there was a kitchen sink, dishes were washed on a board which had pans of water. The dirty water was then thrown on the bamboo by the well, close to the house where the jeep sits now. In later years, after the water tanks were put up, a sink was installed in the new kitchen.¹²

According to Phyllis Keys, the kitchen sink was put in during the construction of the new kitchen. At one time there was running water to the sink. The two pipes lying parallel to the north side of the house and coming out of the ground are probably drain pipes from the sink. Possibly related to this was the fact that Willis Keys once made a generator to produce electricity for the house and put it in a small shed somewhere in the area between the machine shed and the pig shed on the outside of

⁹Keys, tape 2A.

¹⁰Meidell, tape 3B.

¹¹Keys, tape 2A; Meidell, tape 3B.

¹²Keys, tape 2A.

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the garden area by the wash. This eventually allowed the washing machine to be run by electricity. Phyllis remembers a drainage ditch close to where the pipes end.¹³

The table in the kitchen was not there originally but may have been in the living room for a long time. The table and chairs that were in the kitchen previously were loaned to Mrs. Wilburg; where the table is today is not known.¹⁴

The wood cooking stove in the new kitchen was brought from the old Banning Hotel where it served as the cook stove. But it is not certain whether it was already on the premises in the old kitchen.¹⁵

The propane gas cooking oven in the new kitchen was added in later years, during the last years that Frances was alive. It was used along with the wood stove next to it and was installed because it was very hot cooking with the wood stove in the summer. Wood was also becoming very scarce. The Keys family burned the old hard (seemingly petrified) Joshua tree wood which in the early days was relatively plentiful in the desert, along with oak shrubs, pine, and some juniper.¹⁶

The desert cooler attached to the kitchen window on the north wall was used for items such as melons which did not need to be kept very cold. The Servel propane refrigerator there now was used for milk, butter, or whatever needed to be kept very cold.¹⁷

The two-three fuel oil (kerosene?) burner that sits in the kitchen now by the desk was never in the kitchen, nor was it ever used in the house, but was in one of the cabins. It was probably brought to the ranch from one of the mining cabins in the area.¹⁸

There was a sewing machine by the window where the two-burner stove is now, next to the desk. There used to be a big cupboard where the refrigerator now stands; the cupboard now is at right angles and next to the Servel refrigerator. The kitchen table had leaves and there were times when twenty-five to thirty people sat around it. People came to the ranch often and were always offered food and lodging. Mrs. Keys' calendar shows just how many people used to come by (a copy of the calendar

¹³Meidell, tape 4B.

¹⁴Meidell, tape 3A.

¹⁵Meidell, tape 3B.

¹⁶Meidell, tape 4A.

¹⁷Meidell, tape 4A.

¹⁸Meidell, tape 4A.

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is owned by Phyllis). Even in the old days the ranch was never isolated in the desert, for people would come in their old automobiles to visit.¹⁹

6. **Storage room:** The room between the living room and the bathroom was originally part of the open porch and in the 1920s or so, when the children started to arrive, Keys made it into a bedroom. There was a bunk bed there and Willis, Ellsworth and his sister slept there.²⁰

The small bedroom was used by Mrs. Keys to store towels and clothing, and to keep a trunk which held the grandmother's old beaded dress. Later the shelves in the small bedroom were used for storing books and magazines and all kinds of other things.²¹

Keys may have wanted to put in a toilet in the area of the shower and tub. Phyllis Keys Meidell seems to think that the small bedroom originally was going to be made into a bathroom. The tub may have been in there, but became a bedroom.²²

7. **Bathroom:** The bathroom was added in the 1950s. It is partitioned into a bathtub room and shower stall. Keys probably intended to have a water line run back into the bathtub from the line which came into the kitchen. There are two pipes sticking out of the east wall for the shower stall. Bill Keys never finished the shower--he started it and it sat there.²³

The shower and bathtub rooms were actually the shower cabin which stood in the west yard. It was two rooms--shower stall and dressing room. The shower cabin came in later years, after the water tanks were put up and the water piped over to it. The water heater was a water tank set up in a brick enclosure which had a little place underneath where a little fire could be built. In the summer, because of the warm weather, the water did not have to be heated. Bathing took place about once a week in the winter and somewhat more often during the summer. Before the shower cabin existed, everyone would take their turn bathing in the kitchen in an old wash tub.²⁴

8. **Porches, staircase and walkway:** The open porch went all the way around the east, south and two-thirds of the west side of the house. Remnants of the porch roof can still be seen on the south side. The metal porch roofs were supported by posts.

¹⁹Meidell, tape 4B.

²⁰Keys, tapes 2A and 2B.

²¹Meidell, tape 5A.

²²Meidell, tape 5A.

²³Keys, tape 2B; Meidell, tape 2A.

²⁴Keys, tapes 2A and 2B.

Grapevines and roses grew up the posts on the east and south sides. Later Keys closed in the porch on the east side and made it into a bedroom. Keys slept in the east enclosed porch after Frances died. This southern portion of the east porch became Keys' workshop area where he practiced his hobbies of leather work, calligraphy, air brush painting, and rock collecting.²⁵

Underneath the outside staircase Keys stored kerosene in a metal bin. All the house's kerosene lamps were filled in this area. Along the north wall beneath the kitchen windows water was stored in glass jugs along with other miscellaneous junk. Leading from the second-story door is a walkway with rails from the upper story to the boulders. The walkway seems to have had no function other than that the children used to play quite a bit on the boulders on which the north end of the walkway rests.²⁶

C. Historical Context:

For more information on the Desert Queen Ranch, see HABS No. CA-2347.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. **Architectural character:** The original sections of the house complex at Keys Ranch were constructed in 1912-1913 and consisted of a central combination of a two-story section and a one-story south addition to which an open porch was added around three sides. Exterior walls were of board and batten of various widths. A chimney was added in 1917. In later years the porch was enclosed to make bedrooms for the children on the east side and removed on the south and west sides to make room for a kitchen.

The two-story section had a spare bedroom upstairs with entry via an outside staircase; the bottom floor was used as a living room along with part of the south addition; the southern end of the south addition was turned into the main bedroom by adding a partition. The kitchen on the west replaced an earlier kitchen building.

2. **Condition of fabric:** In poor condition. Wooden materials comprising the structure (outside walls, floor boards, and roof) are very dry and fragile.

B. Description of Exterior:

²⁵Keys, tapes 2A and 2B; Meidell, tape 5A.

²⁶Meidell, tape 5B.

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1. **Overall dimensions:** approximately 44' by 36'.

The ranch house is a complex of add-on structures and consists of five major sections:

- a. a two-story section with a gable roof. The first floor was used as a living room and contains a large granite fireplace; the second contains a bedroom reached only from the outside by a staircase along the exterior north wall;
- b. a one-story section with a gable roof extending south from the two-story section. It consists of an extension of the living room and has a bedroom at the southern end;
- c. a one-story section (19'-3" x 12'-3") with a gable roof attached to the west wall of the two-story structure, used as the kitchen;
- d. a long two-room addition (6'-0" x 35'-6") with a shed roof along the eastern wall of the two-story and one-story sections. Originally an open porch, it was enclosed to make small bedrooms and still later the southern end of the addition was turned into a workshop for William Keys; and
- e. a small two-section addition (4'-3" x 14'-2") along the northeast corner of the long enclosed porch, one the gable-roofed bathroom containing a shower stall and bathtub room with a board partition, and the other, a shed on the south.

2. **Foundations:** Structure rests directly on small boulders set on the ground.
3. **Walls:** Unpainted vertical boards throughout all sections of the house. Except for kitchen addition and small section next to shower stall on northeast of building, all walls are board and batten; boards vary greatly in size from 5" to 12" and batten from 1 1/4" to 3". Skirts of corrugated sheet metal or wooden boards have been used in a few places around the house at ground level, possibly as a rain guard or to keep animals out from underneath the house.
4. **Structural system, framing:** Wood-frame structure throughout the house complex.
5. **Porches, outside staircase, suspended walkway:** Currently no porches exist. Except for the north side, the house (the two-story section and extended living/bedroom southern section) had an open porch wrapped around the other three sides. The open porch on the east side of the house was enclosed in 1929-30 by William Keys to create small bedrooms for his children. The open porch on the west side was completely removed to make room for the first kitchen addition in 1918, while the porch on the south side was used until 1943-44; a roof remnant of the south portion remains today. During William Keys' later years, the southern end of the enclosed east porch became a workshop. Siding consists of boards 1/2" x 12" wide

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tacked onto 2" x 6" studs at the bottom of the wall, one 2" x 4" in the middle of the wall and one at the top of the wall.

An outside staircase provides the only access to the second story. Entrance is through a door facing north that is immediately next to the stone chimney of the fireplace on the first floor; the fireplace provides a landing for the outside stairway. Leading from the upper-story door is a short suspended wooden bridge to the boulders on the north side of the house.

6. **Chimneys:** A granite stone-and-mortar chimney rests against the north side of the two-story section of the house. The granite was quarried by Keys from the surrounding mountains.

7. **Openings:**

- a. **Doorways and doors:** The house has a total of seven doors. A handmade board-and-batten door opens from the small shed south of the bathroom. A door with three lights in the west gable end is the only exterior entrance into the kitchen. A paneled door opens from the west side of the south section. A door with one light opens from the west side of the workshop area of the enclosed porch section along the east side of the house. A paneled door with one large pane of glass is located immediately east of the chimney. A paneled door is at the top of the outside staircase directly west of the chimney. On the south side, a door with a board in place of glass panes is fixed shut.
- b. **Windows:** There are fifteen windows in the house complex. On the east, there is an 8'-long fixed window (opaque glass with reinforced wire through the glass) with five lights on the east wall of the enclosed porch on the southern end of the wall; a fixed two-sash window with twelve lights midway along the enclosed porch south of the shed adjacent to the bathroom; and a casement window with one light opening to the outside of the second story.

On the west, there is a sliding window with four lights north of the doorway leading out of the living room; and a one-sash casement window with two lights opening into the second story.

On the north, there is a four-section (four lights) casement window. The east light swings open to the outside while the two central sections are fixed. The west light is boarded with wood panel and constitutes the door to the desert cooler found on the exterior north wall. Also on the north, there is a two-light awning window above the kitchen sink which swings inward; and a small window opening with no frame or glass in the wood board wall on the north side of the shower stall in the addition along the northeast corner of the long enclosed porch.

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On the south, there are two casement kitchen windows with four lights each opening inward, and two sliding windows with four lights each in the master bedroom on the gable end of the southern section of the house complex; one fixed two-light window in the southern wall of the enclosed porch; and two sliding windows, one light each, in the second story.

8. **Roof:** The roofs of the two-story section, the kitchen, the living room/master bedroom, and the bathroom are all gable. The roofs over the enclosed porch and shed next to the bathroom are shed roofs. Corrugated metal covers all the roofs and is held down with mine-car iron tracks that are laid parallel to the ridge.

C. Description of Interior:

1. **Floor Plans:** Each section of the house is one room, except for the extended living room, which has a bedroom partitioned off of it, and the bathroom, which is partitioned into a bathtub room and shower stall.
2. **Flooring:** Wood flooring throughout all sections of the house with linoleum laid over the wood. Tarpaper is laid over the wood floor in the workshop of the enclosed porch. The bathroom has a bare wood floor. The living room section next to the bedroom has a carpet laid in the center of the room which does not reach the walls.
3. **Wall and ceiling finish:** The kitchen walls are covered with plywood along with batten strips. The living-room section by the fireplace has no ceiling but shows the floor joists and floor boards of the upper story which have been covered with at least three types of wallpaper.
4. **Openings:**
 - a. **Doorways and doors:** There are five internal doors: a paneled door opening from kitchen into the section of the living room with the fireplace; a door opening into the parents' bedroom; a door opening into the living room from the workshop of the enclosed porch; a door opening from the living room into the storage room next to the bathroom; and a door opening from the storage room into the bathroom.
 - b. **Windows:** There are three internal windows: a sliding window between the kitchen and living room, which was originally a window on an outside wall; a sliding window between the internal wall of the enclosed porch and the storage room; and a window boarded up with a wood panel between the bathroom and the shed south of it.
5. **Decorative features and trim:** The internal window that originally was an external window on the east wall, north of the door entering the enclosed porch from the living room, has a decorative piece over the top rail of the window frame.

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6. **Hardware:** Hinges for doors and windows and doorknob hardware are usually of store-bought variety; a few iron latch hooks have been made by a blacksmith. Door locksets vary from mortised types to rim lock variety. Use of hinges also varies, being either mortised between the frame and door stile or simply laid exposed on them without being mortised. A few exterior doors have dead bolts on them.
7. **Mechanical equipment:**
 - a. **Heating, air conditioning, ventilation:** Heating in the house may have been produced by the following heating units: one small heating-oil stove in the bedroom; a wood-heated iron cooking oven (Majestic Mfg. Co., St. Louis) in the kitchen; and the large fireplace in the living room. Two other small appliances would have given off heat when in use: a three-burner gas cook-top underneath the window in the southeast corner of the kitchen, as well as a similar two-burner unit along the west wall, in the workshop area of the enclosed porch. But no gas-line hookup is visible leading to the two gas units. There is a propane gas line entering the south wall of the kitchen which provided fuel for a small Gaffers & Sattler gas oven standing next to the iron cook oven as well as to a two-door Servel refrigerator. A propane tank sits by the large gate along the Joshua tree fence about 90' from the house.

There are three vents in the house: one (24" x 14-1/2") in the gable peak on the exterior west wall over the entrance door; an exhaust vent with a metal filter above the kitchen cooking stove; and a simple opening in the middle of the floor to allow heat to enter the second-story bedroom from the fireplace directly below.
 - b. **Lighting:** A 1/2" electrical cable enters the house through the wall of the first floor to the left of the fireplace and at the level of the floor joist of the floor above. This was the main electrical wiring for the house. The cable branches into the kitchen where there are two ceiling lights, one over the kitchen table and one in the area of the kitchen sink and cook stoves. The cable in the living room continues through the support beam and along it to the opposite post, on which there are two electrical outlets. A bulb on a double wire hangs from the beam next to the post with the electrical outlets. In this area there is a floor lamp and a floor cabinet radio. From the center of the beam the cable branches south to a light in the vaulted ceiling, continues through the bedroom wall ending at a ceiling light above the bed. The only electrical switch in the house complex is a button switch on the door frame in the bedroom for the ceiling light.
 - c. **Plumbing:** Plumbing exists in two sections of the house complex: in the kitchen and in the bathroom.

Through the north wall of the kitchen, below the window over the sink, pipes are visible: a short portion of a 3/4" pipe leading to the faucets remains in the

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wall as well as a 1 1/4" pipe for sink water. The large pipe enters the ground and next to it is a small pipe cap (1") just above ground level.

The kitchen also has piping leading from the propane tank used for cooking and refrigeration. The piping from the propane tank has been placed underground and enters the house through the south wall of the kitchen beneath the southwest window, continues and then enters also through the door of the south wall below the handle of the mortised lockset.

The east wall of the shower stall addition has two pipes still in the wall: a 3/4" pipe and a 1/2" pipe with an elbow.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

See Desert Queen Ranch, HABS No. CA-2347.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

See Desert Queen Ranch, HABS No. CA-2347.

ADDENDUM TO
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